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ABSTRACT

Surveys listing 20 issues relating to school choice and special education were sent to the 102 Directors of Special Education in Minnesota. Directors were asked to rate issues as important or not important. The 54 responding directors identified the following issues as most important: (1) excess program costs; (2) effects of enrollment options on the planning process (enrollment projections, staffing, variety of programs, etc.); and (3) the billing of resident districts for special education services. Issues were originally identified at a 1990 meeting of Minnesota legislators, school administrators, parents, teachers, students, advocates, and educational leaders. Twenty issues were grouped into outcome issues (e.g., program excellence and excess program costs), implementation issues (criteria for between-District transfers and local control), and demographic issues (Native American schools and small rural schools). Some comments made by respondents are also presented. Most concerns expressed were in the area of "logistical hassles." Two other matters not immediately obvious in the list of comments were concern about being overridden with students with disabilities and differential concern as a function of category. It is also clear that administrators were concerned about the transfer of students with behavior disorders into their systems. Includes six references. (DB)

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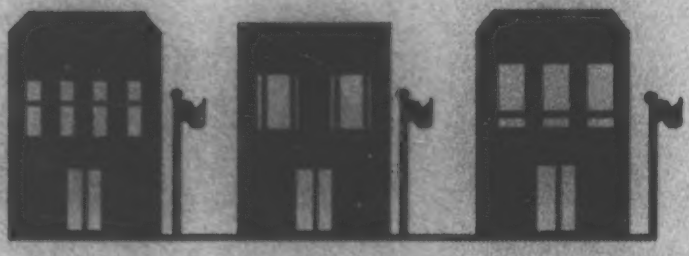
Research Report No. 2



Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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Research Report No. 2

Public School Choice: What About Students With Disabilities?

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Abstract

Surveys listing 20 issues relating to school choice and special education were sent to the 102 Directors of Special Education in the state of Minnesota. Directors were asked to rate the issues as important or not important. Excess program costs, the effects of enrollment options on the planning process (enrollment projections, staffing, variety of programs, etc.) and the billing of resident districts for special education services were found to be the most important issues. Many Directors included reasons for their ratings. The Directors' concerns about logistical problems with enrollment options and special education are discussed.

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Public School Choice: What About Students With Disabilities?

Public school choice has become one of the most visible school reforms of the 1990's. From Massachusetts to Minnesota to Colorado public school choice legislation is being proposed and enacted. Several states are looking to public school choice as an opportunity to initiate positive change while addressing the many issues confronting public schools in the 1990's. Already over 25 states have passed or proposed legislation establishing or expanding public school choice options (Education Commission of the States, 1989b).

The rallying cry for school choice is heard from many sectors. President Bush has said that "certainly among the most promising of [school reform] ideas--is choice." (Paulu, p. 31) Some proponents such as Chubb and Moe (1990) propose "a new system of public education that eliminates most political and bureaucratic control over the schools and relies instead on indirect control through markets and parental choice." (p. 1) And, some educational leaders call for school choice plans that will give <u>all</u> American students the choice that up to this point only the privileged have had; that of choosing the school they attend.(Finn, 1988, p. 79).

Public school choice is gaining momentum as a national school reform, but it is accompanied by a lot of issues. These issues are called into attention in popular press and in professional literature. For example, Education Week (September, 91) reports the disagreements currently being debated in Massachusetts over

the newly passed open enrollment law. Opponents argue that the chief problem with the law is the way state school aid is handled. Few districts are agreeing to participate in the option as they believe it will result in a loss of funds. Others, in favor of the law, see it as a way to work with neighboring districts and receive more diversity and specialization of programs in their districts. In the Economist, (March, 1991), the decisions made by Kentucky and Tennessee to omit parental choice in their school reform packages are discussed. Opponents of public school choice in these states contend that choice could lead to a re-emergence of segregated schools. In their book, School Choice: Issues and Answers (1991), Randall and Geiger discuss the many issues surrounding public school choice. These range from implementation concerns (e.g. transportation, timelines, space limitations) to the reasons for choosing a school other than the assigned school.

Issues surrounding school choice are being discussed in many arenas, yet seldom are issues for students with disabilities considered when public school choice is debated. Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Algozzine, and Nathan (1991) published a monograph in which they identified many issues raised by school choice and enrollment options as they pertain to students with disabilities. In their paper they describe the implications of enrollment options for students with disabilities and for districts that gain or lose students with disabilities through transfer. Their description is based on a review of the professional literature and on the results of an issues clarification working session.

Ysseldyke et al. (1991) describe a working session held in St. Paul, Minnesota in September, 1990. Legislators, school administrators, parents, teachers, students, advocates, and educational leaders from the state of Minnesota were brought together for the purpose of describing and discussing the implications of enrollment options for students with disabilities and for school districts. It was appropriate that leaders in Minnesota were included in the session as Minnesota was one of the first states to enact school choice legislation and has some of the most comprehensive legislation in the country.

Three kinds of issues for districts and students were identified and discussed at the session: outcome issues, implementation issues, and demographic issues. Each of these broader issues was more closely defined by the identification of specific issues within each broad area. The issues and the specific concerns for school districts are listed below.

Issues for Districts

Outcome Issues
- Program Excellence
- Assessment Practice
- Gain/Loss of Teachers
- Excess Program Costs
- Effects On Special Education Child Counts
- Chapter I Allocations

Implementation Issues
- Criteria For Between District Transfers
- Planning
- Provision of Information
- Local Control
- Transportation
- Criteria For Identifying Students As Handicapped
- Mainstreaming

Demographics
- Native American Schools
- Small Rural Schools

The comments and contributions from the participants at the working session described in the monograph by Ysseldyke et. al. provide a starting point in the discussion of issues relating to school choice and students with disabilities and the school districts that provide their programs. The working session described issues deemed important by a select group of individuals. However, further investigation is necessary to verify the importance of the issues identified at the working session. While there are many issues pertinent to students with disabilities, in this paper we examine the school choice issues for school districts serving students with disabilities. We employ the help of Directors of Special Education, whose responsibilities include the implementation of special education programs and school choice programs, to help us determine if the issues for schools districts are, in fact, those reported. The following research questions are addressed.

- What are the school choice issues Directors of Special Education identify as important?
- To what extent do the Directors identify these as important?
- How do the issues differ as a function of type of school district?
- What are the reasons the Directors give for rating an issue as important or not important?

Method

The extent to which school choice issues are identified as important by Directors of Special Education was investigated through a survey sent to the 102 Directors of Special Education in Minnesota. The Directors coordinate special education programs in the 433 school districts in the state. Fifty-four respondents are Directors at programs in individual districts and 49 direct programs at one of the state's special education cooperatives. One Director was responsible for both a cooperative and an individual district. Cooperatives serve primarily the small, rural districts of Minnesota where the special education services of several small districts have been consolidated.

The information gathered at the working session described in the monograph by Ysseldyke et al. (1991) was used to develop a list of 20 issues pertinent to school districts when school choice is implemented. The areas of implementation, student outcomes, and demographics relevant to students with disabilities were included. Prior to distribution the survey was discussed with six Directors of Special Education. These Directors represented the variety of school districts present in the state. The comments from the Directors were used to improve the survey's readability and to verify the importance of the issues selected for the survey.

The cover letter included a description of the state's enrollment option programs and asked the Directors to complete a survey about enrollment options and any other type of transfer arrangements in which the district was involved.

Directions for the survey were as follows:

1. Rate each issue as either Important, Somewhat Important, or Not Important when students with disabilities transfer in or out of your district under one of the enrollment options or tuition agreements.
2. To the extent possible, please indicate the reason these are or are not areas of concern for your district.
3. After rating each issue, rank order the top five issues for your district. Assign the Number 1 to what you believe is the most critical issue.[1]

Results

The issues surveys were returned by 59% (62) of the Directors of Special Education. The total respondents included 27 Directors of Special Education Cooperatives and 31 Directors of Special Education at school districts not directly involved in cooperatives. Four respondents did not identify their school district.

The ratings of the issues are summarized in Column 1 of Table 1. All ratings given as important or somewhat important were combined into one category of important. This was done to simplify data analysis efforts since we are most interested in determining if an issue is important, not in the level of who rated the issue as important. The three issues listed as important by the most respondents were:

[1]A copy of the complete survey is available from James Ysseldyke, Ph.D., Enrollment Options for Students With Disabilities, University of Minnesota, 350 Elliott Hall, 75 East River Road, Minneapolis, MN 55455.

(1) Excess program costs (84%),

(2) The effects of enrollment options on the planning process(enrollment projections, staffing, variety of programs etc.) (82%),

(3) The billing of resident districts for special education services (81%).

Only one issue was not considered important by the majority of respondents; the effects on Special Education child counts (45%).

Chi Square tests were completed on each of the twenty issues to ascertain any significant differences between the ratings of Directors from separate districts versus those from cooperatives. No significant differences were found on any of the issues ($p < .05$).

In addition to rating each issue as important or not important, respondents were asked to rank the top five issues. Their rankings were weighted to give proportional value to the issues. Each ranking of one was given a weighted value of five; two was given a value of four, etc. The weighted ranking of issues is shown in Column 2 of Table 1. The effects of enrollment options on the planning process (enrollment projections, staffing, variety of programs, etc.) received the highest weighted ranking (85).

The "effects on planning" and "excess program costs" were issues considered important by the highest number of respondents and were also given the highest weighted values when the rankings were tabulated.

Table 1

Importance of Issues Reported by Directors of Special Education

	% of resondents report importance	Rank ordered values weighted
Excess program costs.	84%	59
The effects of enrollment options on your planning process (enrollment projections, staffing, variety of programs, etc.).	82%	85
The billing of resident districts for special education services.	81%	55
Parental use of choice to facilitate inclusion of their children with handicaps into regular education.	81%	41
Levy issues in the community.	76%	43
Transportation.	75%	55
The availability and accessibility of specific special education programs.	75%	41
The effects on parent involvement.	75%	20
The effects on parent-school communication.	74%	25
The legal requirement that you establish open enrollment criteria that are reasonable and nondiscriminatory.	69%	31
The additional assessments for students entering through an enrollment option or tuition agreement.	69%	21
The differences in special education identification criteria between your district and other districts.	66%	56
Program excellence (i.e. when students come and go the quality of the program is affected).	66%	35
The loss of local control; especially for students with disabilities.	65%	37
Distribution of enrollment options information to parents.	64%	4
The differences in open enrollment acceptance criteria between your district and other districts.	62%	21
The effects on Least Restrictive Environment (L.R.E.).	64%	33
The effects on rural special education programs.	61%	32
The gain or loss of teachers' jobs due to enrollment options.	56%	20
The effects on Special Education child counts.	45%	7

Many respondents included the reasons for their ratings or rankings. Comments varied by the rating response for the issues. Those who identified an issue as important often gave a reason for the rating that included a problem or confusion surrounding the issue. For those respondents who rated an issue as not important their reasons often included statements such as "not a problem", "this has been done".

In Table 2 we list representative comments made by Directors of Special Education for the top ten ranked issues. We show comments made by those who rated the issue "Important" and those who rated it "Not Important." For example, excess program costs was the issue most respondents identified as important. Comments reflected the respondents' concern with additional costs being assigned to districts. One Director commented that "most students who come to our district have severe needs and need many services. Another said that "financial responsibility needs to be established." No one who rated the issue as not important made a comment.

Planning was of concern to most of the respondents. Those who rated the issue as important made comments like "Heavy duty kids coming and going have large impact," and "Can't do adequate planning without knowing who's going to be there" "Finding teachers with appropriate licensure in rural areas -- difficult and long process." The one comment made by a Director rating the issue as unimportant was that "An insignificant number of transfers [is] occurring."

Table 2

Comments Made by Directors for Each of the Five Issues Ranked Highest

---

Issue: Excess program costs

Comments by those who rated the issue "important"

- How consistently is [it] figured between districts.
- Most students who come to our district have severe needs and need many services.
- Financial responsibility needs to be established.
- Could be forced to add facilities, staff, equipment.
- High variable! Resident districts get stuck with these but some refuse to pay.

Comments by those who rated the issue "not important"

- None

Issue: Planning

Comments by those who rated the issue "important"

- Heavy duty kids coming and goign have large impact.
- Additional students mean additional staffing and Boards of Education do not want to add.
- Can't do adequate planning without knowing who's going to be there; finding teachers with appropriate licensure in rural areas -- difficult and long process.
- Tends to destabilize programs

Comments by those who rated the issue "not important"

- Insignificant number of transfers [occurring].

Table 2 (continued)

Comments Made by Directors for Each of the Five Issues Ranked Highest

---

Issue: The billing of resident districts for special education services (81%)

Comments by those who rated the issue "important"

- Administrative and Clerical staff time.
- One board decisions to be paid for by another.
- More paperwork.

Comments by those who rated the issue "not important"

- [Law] allows recover of costs of transfer.
- Has gone well so far!

Issue: Parental use of choice to facilitate inclusion

Comments by those who rated the issue "important"

- This may be a plus or a problem, especially if superintendents or principals see this as a way to discourage serving students with special needs in the integrated (inclusion) environment.
- Could impact some schools with hard to educate/manage handicapped students.
- Unfortunate if parents must use open enrollment to facilitate inclusion.

Comments by those who rated the issue "not important"

- Parents tend to use it to achieve more special education vs inclusion.
- Districts who do not wish to implement inclusion suggest parents go elsewhere.

Table 2 (continued)

Comments Made by Directors for Each of the Five Issues Ranked Highest

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Issue: Levy issues in the community (76%)

Comments by those who rated the issue "important"

- Right now the general funds are being raped for costs in some severe excess costs cases.
- Local taxpayers subsidizing students in open enrollment.
- Why should providing district pick up levy determining what to bill another district is costly.
- Unless levy referendums are equalized, parents could choose higher spending districts.

Comments by those who rated the issue "not important"

- Kids belong to a community of people.

Issue: Transportation (75%)

Comments by those who rated the issue "important"

- We already have a monster here; how much worse can it get?
- Only those students close to adjacent school bus route use the option.
- [An issue] especially for physical handicapped [children].
- This will have major impact on amount of open enrollment participation.
- Always a greater concern in rural area -- less options available.
- Unbelievable cost, more than education.

Comments by those who rated the issue "not important"

- Most transfer require parents to transport.
- Not a problem unless funding reduced.

Table 2 (continued)

Comments Made by Directors for Each of the Five Issues Ranked Highest

---

Issue: The effects on parent involvement (75%)

Comments by those who rated the issue "important"

- Could [be] reduced; however, could increase because parent has selected this program -- feel more comfortable.
- Open enrollment options can confound communication over an expanded geographic area and limit parental involvement.

Comments by those who rated the issue "not important"

- Put the weight on parents.
- Distance doesn't seem to matter in this regard.

Issue: The availability and accessability of specific special education programs (75%)

Comments by those who rated the issue "important"

- Significant concern for districts in rural area.
- In a smaller size district this is a concern; anyone try and meet the needs here?
- Must develop programs without notice.

Comments by those who rated the issue "not important"

- All districts mandated to serve all kids or a continuum.

Discussion

Public school choice is here. Students with disabilities are participating in open enrollment by transferring school districts. The act of transfer raises issues, concerns, and maybe even fears for school district directors of special education. In this study we reported the perceptions of 54 Directors of Special Education about the implementation issues that arise as students with disabilities transfer districts. Most of the concerns identified by Directors, frankly, could be said to fall under the general heading "logistical hassles." Directors expressed concern about funding services, and billing, staffing, transportation, charge backs, excess program costs, etc. They did not express concerns (at least in this survey) about the effects of open enrollment on instructional quality.

Two matters not immediately obvious in reading over the list of comments are concern about being over-ridden with students with disabilities and differential concern as a function of category. Many Directors indicated they were concerned about being "overloaded" with students with disabilities. It is also clear that administrators are concerned about the transfer of students with behavior disorders. Clearly, they are not recruiting these students; they tell us they hope few apply to transfer into their districts.

It is clear that there are major issues that arise when students with disabilities transfer school districts. Administrators nationally may be able to plan for implementation of open enrollment by considering the concerns of Minnesota

Directors of Special Education. Researchers will be ascertaining over time the congruence between expressed concerns and actual outcomes.

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